

**RESPONDING TO PHONE INQUIRIES AND MAINTAINING
SATISFACTION AMONG CALLERS:
INFORMATION FROM THE CALLER'S PERSPECTIVE**

by

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Bureau staff are currently facing a dilemma: How to maintain high levels of satisfaction among telephone callers given fewer staff due to downsizing of the Bureau. Various alternatives are being considered including use of 1-800 numbers, 1-900 numbers, and automated attendants. Data from a recently completed study by the Human Dimensions Research Unit (HDRU) and DEC staff may shed some light on possible options from the perspective of callers to the Bureau. The study (Job 2-3, Program Expectations) collected data from telephone screening interviews conducted with members of the general public who called the Bureau with a question or problem (hereafter referred to as service-related calls). Bureau staff conducted these interviews for the year August '94 - July '95. Data also was collected from mail questionnaires sent to a sample of callers with interest in the Bureau's information services program. Data were weighted such that they represent current callers to the Bureau statewide.

Data from this study can be useful for making decisions about future telephone service in three possible ways:

1. Document the current number of calls received by the Bureau and the high satisfaction of callers with Bureau telephone service.
2. Explore caller preferences for telephone service options and who is likely to become dissatisfied if a more automated system is installed.
3. Provide input on the feasibility of an automated attendant system.

1. Document the current number of calls received by the Bureau and the high satisfaction of callers with Bureau telephone service.
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An estimated 77,700+ service-related calls were made to Bureau of Wildlife offices during the year (Aug. '94 - July '95). Most calls came in during the fall season with an estimated 3,000 calls per week statewide during

that period. The estimated number of service-related calls received at each site during the course of the study is shown in Table 1.

The "audience" of callers to the Bureau was smaller than the number of calls because many people (45%) called the Bureau more than once during the year. The number of callers was estimated at 55,000 for the year Aug. '94 - July '95. Alternatively, some people may call the Bureau only once in two or three years, so over a longer period of time the "audience" of callers would be larger than 55,000.

Satisfaction with the Bureau's telephone service was high. From the mail questionnaire we found that 68% of respondents were very satisfied with the Bureau's response to their most recent telephone request; 90% were at least moderately satisfied. Additionally, 90% of mail questionnaire respondents rated the Bureau's telephone service as good or excellent in general. Slight differences in satisfaction existed by Region and are shown in Table 1.

Almost all mail questionnaire respondents found the Bureau's response to their most recent call to be courteous and professional (Table 2). They also found the Bureau staff to be responsive and helpful. Some slight improvements might be made in the area of efficiency, but the average score given by respondents on the semantic-differential scale was still well above the mid-point between efficient and inefficient. Regions or offices whose average scores were well above the others are listed in Table 2.

Table 1. Estimated number of service-related calls received by the Bureau in one year (Aug. '94 - July '95), and the percent of mail survey respondents who were satisfied with the response to the initial inquiry and to the Bureau's telephone service in general—overall and by site.

	Estimated Number of Service-related Calls Per Year	% Moderately to Very Satisfied With Bureau Response to Inquiry	% Saying General Telephone Service is Good to Excellent
TOTAL	77,727	89.5	90.5
Region 1	7,227	95.7	86.4
Region 3	6,680	93.6	89.3
Region 4	7,041	89.7	92.2
Schenectady	4,747	87.4	88.4
Stamford	2,294	94.5	100.0
Region 5	4,514	89.0	85.7
Ray Brook	1,064	NA	NA
Warrensburg	3,450	89.2	85.2
Region 6	6,037	95.7	93.3
Watertown	4,011	95.1	94.5
Utica	2,026	NA	NA
Region 7	4,913	95.3	94.5
Region 8	12,730	88.4	92.0
Avon	10,693	88.9	91.9
Bath	962	NA	NA
Iroquois	1,075	NA	NA
Region 9	11,389	88.6	93.2
Buffalo	7,882	90.4	96.8
Olean	3,507	84.7	85.2
Central Office	17,196	83.1	88.3
Albany	768	NA	NA
Delmar	1,702	NA	NA
Latham	1,380	NA	NA
DMP "800"	13,346	79.3	88.9

NA = not available due to small sample size.

Table 2. Evaluation of the most recent call to the Bureau. ("X" represents the average score of all callers.)

The Bureau's reply to my telephone call was:										Standout Regions or Offices
courteous	X									6 Utica, Buffalo
professional	X									6, 8, 9, Delmar
responsive	X									7, Stamford, Albany
helpful	X									6, Delmar
beneficial	X									Stamford, Ray Brook, Utica, Albany, Delmar
sufficient	X									6, Albany, Ray Brook, Stamford
efficient	X									6, Ray Brook, Stamford
encouraging		X								

2. Explore callers' preferences for telephone service options and who is likely to become dissatisfied if a more automated system is installed.

Respondents with interest in the Bureau's information services were asked how they thought the Bureau should respond to people who wanted to learn more about wildlife. Three different telephone options were presented: (1) regional number with direct contact with Bureau staff, (2) regional number with recorded information on common questions and with the option of speaking to Bureau staff or leaving a message, and (3) a statewide 800 number. Respondents could choose one or more options. Over half of the respondents chose Option 1 (regional number, direct contact), whereas only one-third chose Option 2 (regional number, recorded messages with option to speak with staff); 47% chose a statewide 800 number.

Preferences for telephone systems differed by age and the type of system currently encountered, but did not differ by sex, urban/rural residence, or type of wildlife-related activities callers participate in. Older and younger respondents generally preferred the options with immediate direct contact with staff, whereas middle-aged respondents were open to the more automated option (Table 3). Experience with a telephone system increased the likelihood of rating that system as acceptable in the future. Those who called partially automated systems (i.e., Regions 3 and 7) were more likely to find an even more automated system acceptable than those who call the 800 number or have direct regional contact. Those who have direct regional contact or used the DMP 800 number tended to favor their current systems.

Almost one-third (29%) of respondents found only Option 1 (regional number, direct contact) to be acceptable. These people are most likely to

Table 3. Percent of respondents with interest in the Bureau's information services program who found each of the three telephone options acceptable—overall, by age and by telephone system used to contact the Bureau on their most recent call.

	Telephone Options		
	Regional Number, Direct Contact With Staff	Regional Number, Recorded Information, Option to Speak With Staff	Statewide 1-800 Number
	% Finding Option Acceptable		
Overall	55.0	33.3	46.9
Age			
<29	61.8	33.4*	46.2*
30-39	43.5	37.9	45.5
40-49	60.2	43.0	33.9
50+	56.9	21.3	61.3
System Used			
Regional Number, Direct Contact	58.0	33.2*	42.3
Regional Number, Automated Answer and Voice Mail	54.7	49.6	44.1
Statewide, 1-800 Number	43.8	18.8	56.3

*Statistically significant differences between age groups or current phone system users at $P \leq .05$ using Chi-square test.

become dissatisfied if an automated system is installed. They did not differ in terms of sociodemographic characteristics from those who found a variety of systems to be acceptable. Thus, no specific audience can be identified that would oppose a switch to a more automated system.

There is some indication from Table 3 that people favor what they currently have. However, the automated systems currently in place are relatively new and satisfaction with telephone service is high in those Regions, suggesting that those callers adapted to a new system without a large drop in satisfaction. Caller satisfaction with the DMP 800 number was lower

than in other regions, but over half of DMP 800 number callers favored 800 numbers in the future, indicating that it was not the 800 number system that caused the lower satisfaction. Thus, it appears that people would adapt to a new more automated system with little change in overall satisfaction.

Strong support exists for the use of general tax revenues to pay for information services provided to the public by the Bureau (Fig. 1). Over three-quarters of respondents favored the use of general tax revenues to provide New Yorkers with at least basic written or telephone information. Seven percent of respondents wrote in that license sale money should be used instead of general tax revenues or individual payments for services. Almost all of these people did hunt or trap in the past year, but only 62% of the reasons why they called the Bureau were for hunting or trapping-related questions.

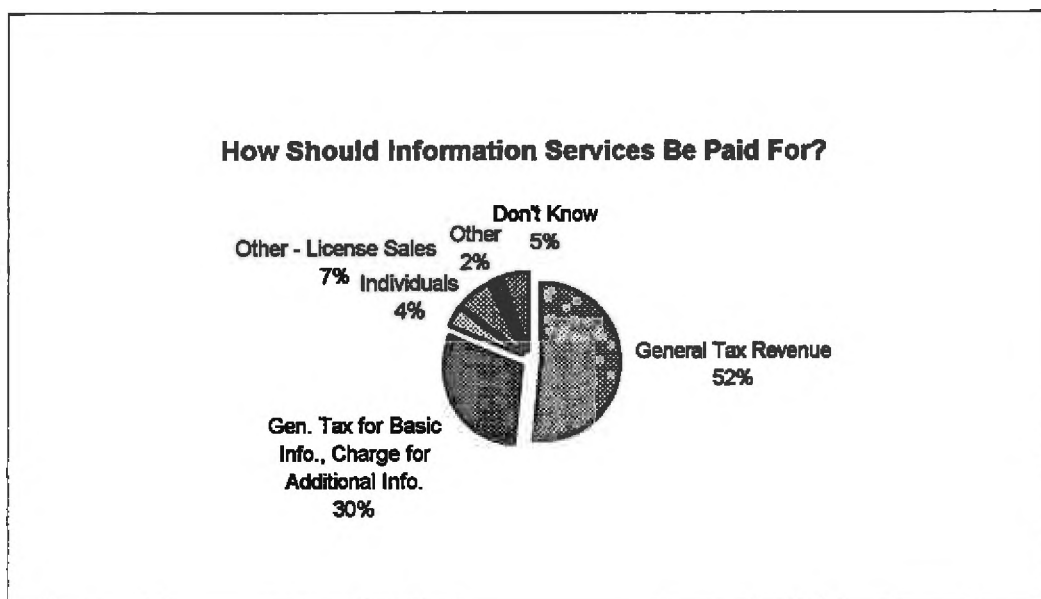


Figure 1. Respondents' perception of who should pay for information services provided by the Bureau.

3. Provide input on the feasibility of an automated attendant system.

An automated attendant system answers the call, provides options for directing the call by having the caller press a certain number, then provides information on the selected topic or forwards the call to a specific individual. In some cases the system can also take down information such as requests for certain publications, along with the callers' name and address.

For an automated system to be worthwhile at least three criteria would have to be met.

- (1) A large number of people would have to call with similar questions.
- (2) The answers would have to be succinct enough to be taped and/or provide for an option to leave name and address for specific information to be sent.
- (3) The system would have to be sufficiently acceptable to the public that the current level of high satisfaction among callers would be maintained.

Criteria 1: According to our data 66% of all calls statewide fell into six topical groups: nuisance/damage concern (20%), deer management permit (19%), hunter training course (11%), pheasant stocking (6%), hunting regulations (5%), and bird behavior/habitat (5%). The two largest groups represented approximately 15,000 calls each annually (Table 4).

Criteria 2: For four of the six largest topical groups, the vast majority of the calls were answered over the phone or by mailing information to the caller (Table 4). Calls in these topical groups are potential candidates for an automated system because most of the information is

Table 4. Estimated number of calls per year for the six most common topic areas and the agency response to those calls.

	Percent of Calls On Topic	Estimated Number Of Calls On Topic	Agency Response		
			Answered On Phone	Mailed Information	Other
Primary Topics				%	
Nuisance/damage Concern	20	15,545	46.5	9.9	43.6
Deer Management Permit	19	14,768	88.2 ^a	3.0	8.8
Hunter Training Course	11	8,550	83.0 ^b	2.7	14.3
Pheasant Stocking	6	4,664	75.8 ^c	12.8	11.4
Hunter Regulations (not DMP)	5	3,886	71.7	12.9	15.4
Bird Behavior/habitat	5	3,886	39.3	9.9	50.8

^aGave information on permit notification dates and reasons for not receiving a permit.

^bGave names of instructors, phone numbers, dates and locations of courses.

^cProvided information on pheasant release sites.

transferred over the phone with some follow-up mailings. Calls on pheasant stocking would seem especially well suited because the information given by Bureau staff on release sites is very specific and brief. Similarly, information on hunter training course dates and locations could be given by an automated attendant. Some Deer Management Permit calls, such as "When will I find out if I got a permit?", could be answered by an automated attendant. Other calls concerning why the callers did not get a permit involve more detailed and sympathetic attention requiring a staff member to respond. Other hunting regulations questions maybe too diverse to be answered by a few options, so may not be good candidates for an automated system. Thus, if pheasant stocking, hunter training course, and some deer management permit calls were answered by an automated attendant, the number of calls answered by Bureau staff could be reduced by approximately 20% or 15,500 calls.

Criteria 3: After a through search of the academic literature and discussions with faculty in the Communications Department at Cornell, we found very little information on the acceptability of automated attendant systems by the general public. One study of bank users found those who used the automated telephone banking services were satisfied with the service, and many would be willing to do all their banking by telephone (White 1994). Two-thirds of bank customers in general would be willing to use the phone for simple transactions such as account inquiries. For more complex transactions such as loans, they would prefer personal banking.

From our study of callers' satisfaction with Bureau telephone service, it appears that changes to new systems such as those now found in Regions 3 and 7 did not reduce overall satisfaction with Bureau telephone service. If callers were dissatisfied with the new system, it was not a big enough problem to reduce their overall satisfaction. Respondents who were exposed to the automated systems were also more likely than other respondents to prefer the more automated alternative in the future. Publicizing a change by telling callers why the change was implemented and what to expect when they call would help to keep expectations for service in line with reality and thus reduce chances for dissatisfaction. Also, starting out with a pilot system and follow-up evaluation of caller satisfaction would be ideal. With all this in mind, it would seem plausible to consider an automated attendant service for the Bureau without undo concern that the service would decrease overall satisfaction with Bureau telephone service.

Literature Cited

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